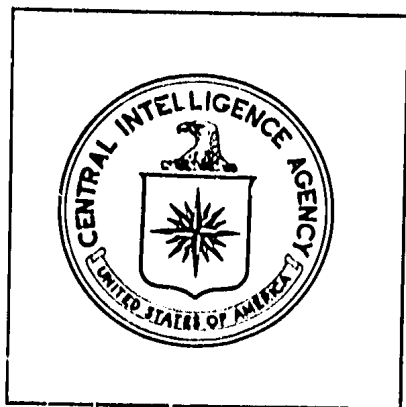


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CIAOGCR      RP 75-24      May 75  
Camb. Claims in Gulf of Thailand: More Trouble Brewing

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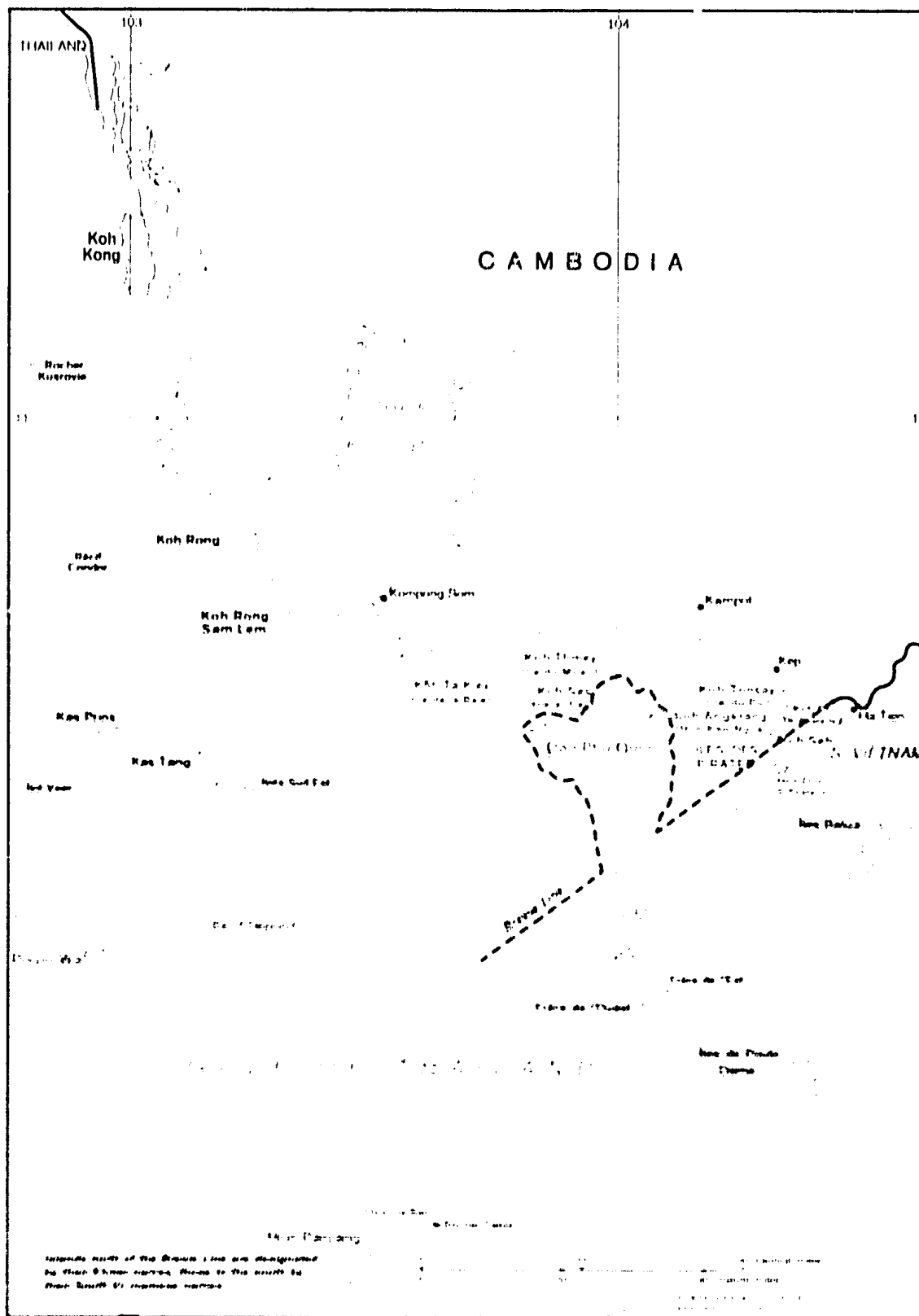
CAMBODIAN CLAIMS IN THE GULF OF THAILAND:  
MORE TROUBLE BREWING

NOTE: This paper was produced by the Office of Geographic and Cartographic Research. Comments or questions may be directed to [REDACTED] Code 143, Extension 3057.

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## Contested Islands in the Gulf of Thailand



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### Cambodian Claims in the Gulf of Thailand: More Trouble Brewing

The May 12 seizure of the Mayaguez near the tiny islands of Poulo Wai highlights the long smoldering dispute between Cambodia and South Vietnam over islands in the Gulf of Thailand. Although the islands have little intrinsic economic value -- most are no more than a few square miles in area and inhabited only seasonally by fishermen -- oil lends a highly contentious element to the dispute. The islands have been used by both Cambodia and South Vietnam as base points from which to stake out their claims to the potentially petroleum-rich seabed of the Gulf of Thailand. The position of Poulo Wai astride the main shipping route between Bangkok and the South China Sea offered the new Cambodian government a good opportunity to assert its claim to the island (see facing map and table, page 5).

The Cambodian seizure of the Mayaguez and other foreign vessels for violating its claimed territorial waters strongly suggests that Phnom Penh will take a tough stance not only with Saigon in any future negotiations over the sovereignty of all the contested islands but also, more importantly, with both Saigon and Bangkok over their overlapping claims to the continental shelf (see map, page 3).\*

Cambodia, squeezed between two more powerful neighbors, has always been sensitive about its borders. To most Cambodian leaders, the salient feature of the modern history of Indochina has been the unrelenting pressure exerted on Cambodian territory by the more aggressive Thai and Vietnamese. Since gaining independence from France in 1949, a key goal of Cambodian foreign policy has been to prevent encroachments by these neighbors. The new Khmer

\* In addition to recent actions directed against foreign merchant ships, Cambodian governments past and present have seized fishing boats that presumably had violated the Cambodian territorial waters.

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Rouge leaders undoubtedly share this goal. The potential oil wealth in the Gulf of Thailand has extended the area of potential confrontation to the offshore islands.

The maritime boundary between Cambodia and South Vietnam has been contested since the French colonial era. Unable to resolve the sovereignty dispute between Cambodia and the colony of Cochinchina, the French Governor General of Indochina, Jules Brevie, had a line drawn in 1939 from the terminus of the land boundary between the two states seaward at a 234 degree azimuth. All islands to the northwest of the line were to be administered by Cambodia; those to the southeast by Cochinchina. (The line looped around Phu Quoc so as to place it under Cochinchina's administration.) Brevie explicitly disclaimed any attempt to resolve the sovereignty issue with this decree.

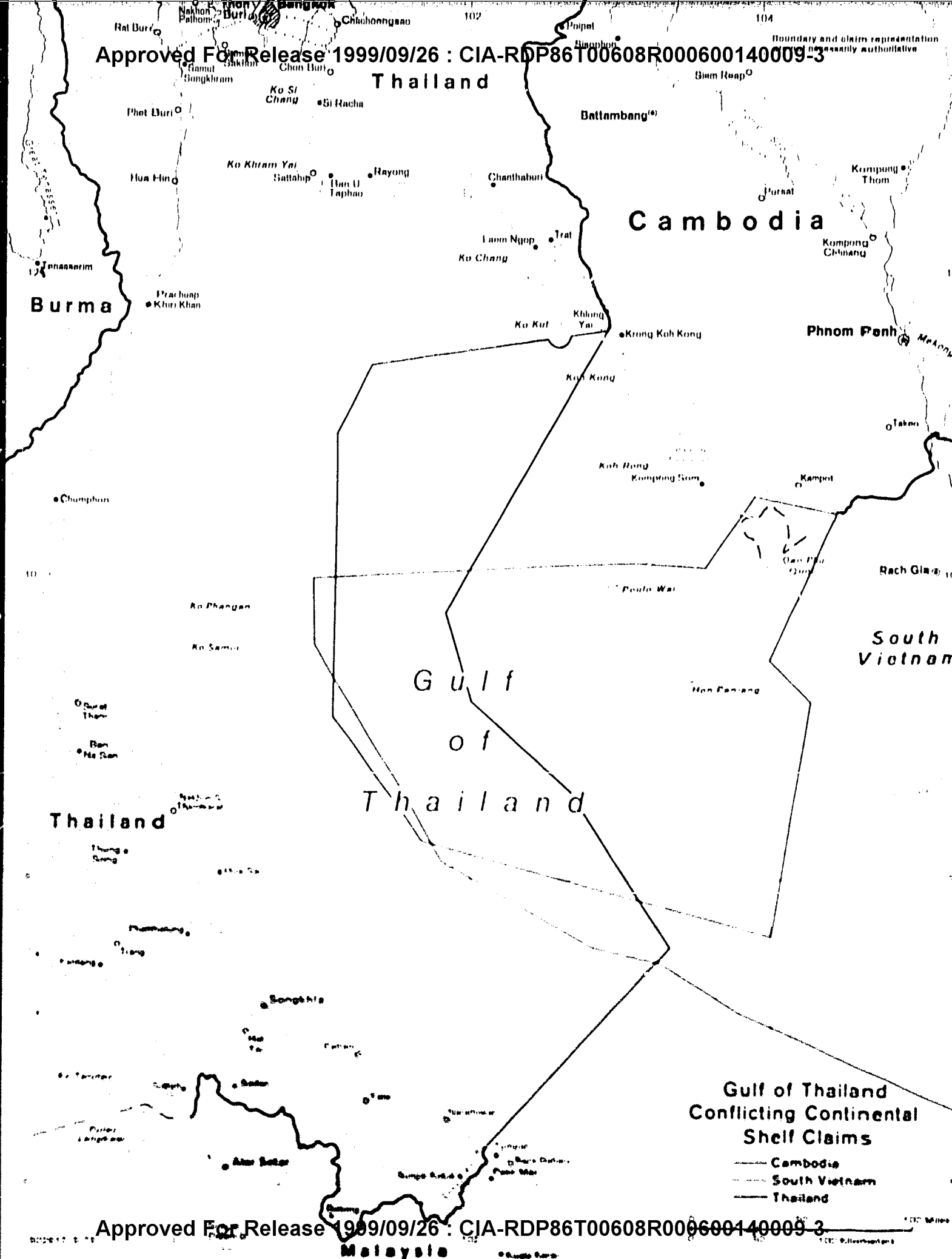
Until 1958 both Cambodia and South Vietnam accepted the Brevie Line as the de facto boundary. Since then, South Vietnam has rejected it and laid claim to several islands lying between Phu Quoc and the Cambodian mainland. By the mid-1960's Cambodia had also renounced the Brevie Line and extended its claim to islands lying to the southeast of it.

Poulo Wai, isolated from the other contested islands, lies more than 25 nautical miles to the northwest of an extension of the Brevie Line and about 50 nautical miles from the mainland. It comprises two islands totaling no more than 2 square miles and supports no permanent population. South Vietnam has never made a direct claim to the island. Cambodia nonetheless felt it necessary to reassert its claim in response to a September 1974 note from Saigon disputing Cambodian jurisdiction over the nearby continental shelf.

Cambodia has since 1969 claimed a 12-mile territorial sea measured from the mainland as well as around islands in the Gulf of Thailand. The claim was made official in a decree issued in August 1972. (There have been unconfirmed reports that the new government claims a 30-mile territorial sea.) The 1958 United Nations Convention on the Territorial Sea did not specify its breadth, but it did assert the right of ships of all nations to sail through the territorial sea "so long as such passage is not prejudicial to the peace, good order, or security of the coastal state."

The Gulf of Thailand is a shallow semienclosed water body that is everywhere less than 200 meters deep; i.e., it is floored entirely by a continental shelf. According to the 1958 United Nations

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Convention on the Continental Shelf, the mineral resources of the seabed and subsoil of the shelf fall under the jurisdiction of the neighboring coastal state. Where the same shelf is adjacent to the coasts of two or more states, the Convention called for the use of an equidistance principle to allocate the shelf to the states in the absence of any other agreement among them. The Convention, however, did not provide adequate guidelines to apply the principle. Nor has the recently concluded session of the Law of the Sea Conference in Geneva provided any further guidance. This shortcoming has created a complex seabed jurisdictional picture in the Gulf. Each of the coastal states -- Cambodia, South Vietnam, and Thailand -- has made an ambitious unilateral claim that uses tiny offshore islands as base points in order to maximize its cut of the seabed. Because of the variant methods used and because of conflicting island claims, more than one-half of Cambodia's 35,000-square-mile shelf claim is also claimed by South Vietnam and about one-fourth by Thailand. Both Cambodia and South Vietnam have used Poulo Wai as a key base point for staking their claims. The lines that define Cambodian and South Vietnamese continental shelf boundaries with Thailand were drawn equidistant between the islands of Poulo Wai and Hon Panjang in the east and the Thai mainland in the west.

Cambodia defined its continental shelf claim in a decree adopted in 1972. South Vietnam had issued its claim in 1971. Both countries subsequently granted concession blocks to petroleum companies, and exploratory drilling began in 1974. Companies drilling in South Vietnam's concession areas reported promising finds. The French-US oil consortium licensed to test drill on Cambodia's seabed, however, reported no discoveries. Operations licensed by both countries have now been suspended.

The most explosive incident involving conflicting claims to the continental shelf occurred in September 1974 after Saigon had demanded the removal of a Cambodian-licensed exploratory oil rig from a disputed sector of the shelf 40 to 45 miles southwest of Poulo Wai. Before the rig was removed and the two countries agreed to negotiate their differences, both sides had exchanged strongly worded diplomatic protests. A Cambodian naval unit operating from Poulo Wai faced a confrontation with Vietnamese naval vessels that had been given orders to establish a blockade around the rig.

During negotiations in 1973 and prior to the oil rig dispute in 1974, Saigon had been willing to concede the sector of the shelf around Poulo Wai in return for a maritime frontier which assured its retention of Phu Quoc (about 500 square miles in

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CONTESTED ISLANDS IN THE GULF OF THAILAND:  
 TOPONOMY, LOCATIONS, AND STATUS

<u>English or French</u>	<u>Vietnamese</u>	<u>Khmer</u>	<u>Geographic Coordinates</u>	<u>Last Known Status</u>
	Dao Phu Quoc	Koh Trai	10°18'N 104°00'E	South Vietnamese inhabited
Milieu	Hon Phu Du	Koh Thmey	10°28'N 103°46'E	Probably Khmer
Eau	Hon Nuoc	Koh Ses	10°25'N 103°48'E	Unknown
Recif Depond (rocks awash)			09°55'N 103°10'E	Unoccupied
Peak (Pic)	Hon Antay	Koh Tonsay	10°26'N 104°20'E	Unknown
North Pirate Island	Hon Tre Mam	Koh Po	10°24'N 104°20'E	Unknown
	Hon Keo Ngua	Koh Angkrang	10°22'N 104°19'E	Unknown
		Koh Seh	10°21'N 104°20'E	Unknown
Base	Hon Vung	Koh Ta Kiev	10°29'N 103°36'E	Probably Khmer
South Pirate Island	Hon Duoc		10°16'N 104°18'E	Unknown
Poulo Wai		Koh Wai	09°56'N 102°56'E	Khmer
	Hon Panjang		09°18'N 103°28'E	South Vietnamese de facto control
	Hon Da Bon		09°22'N 103°22'E	Unknown

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area, by far the largest of the contested islands). Cambodia rejected the offer and assessed Saigon's later demand for removal of the rig near Poulo Wai as intended to force Cambodia into an agreement on Phu Quoc. Further talks were held in Saigon in late September 1974 -- after the oil rig dispute had abated -- and again in March of this year. Although Saigon was still willing to concede a large part of the shelf, Cambodia took a firm position on Phu Quoc. It suggested that a line be drawn from the mainland through Hon Panjang, leaving Phu Quoc on the Cambodian side. This was clearly an effort to attain a larger shelf concession from Saigon. The talks -- the last to be held by the pre-communist governments -- ended with nothing further resolved.

The potential petroleum wealth in the Gulf of Thailand supplies ample incentive for Cambodia to assert its sovereignty over far offshore islands such as Poulo Wai and Hon Panjang. Despite generally close ties between the new communist regimes in Phnom Penh and Saigon, Cambodia's hard line on its island claims portends difficult times over the offshore boundary issue. Although Thailand has not yet been drawn into any of the disputes over the seabeds, promising test wells have been drilled by Thai-licensed oil companies near seabed areas contested by both Cambodia and South Vietnam. Discovery of commercial deposits will toughen the Thai position in any future negotiations by the three countries to resolve their seabed boundary differences.

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